

Conrad Weiser

Colonial leader Conrad Weiser would not hesitate to take up arms in defense of his homeland, but preferred to first seek peaceful solutions, even in times of hostility, growing turmoil, and uncertainty. Weiser lived in the early 1700s, when tensions and confrontations were escalating among neighboring English colonists, Native Americans, and French settlers. Known to the Iroquois as Tarachiawagon or "Holder of the Heavens," Weiser was widely known for his diplomatic missions seeking peace between colonists and Native Americans. But that was only one side of Weiser, a complex man who was also a soldier, farmer, a magistrate, entrepreneur, and a lay religious leader. While many people shrank in fear of Native Americans, or prepared single-mindedly for war, Weiser walked a different path, choosing to live with the Iroquois Confederacy at the age of sixteen, learning their

language, and forging a strong bond that would promote peace among Native Americans and settlers in Pennsylvania throughout his lifetime.

Weiser was born in the village of Affstat in Wurttemberg, Germany, on November 2, 1696. He settled in New York's Hudson Valley with his family in 1710 and shortly thereafter, in the winter and spring of 1712-13, went to live in a village of the Mohawks, a tribe of the Iroquois Confederacy known as the Six Nations. Weiser learned to speak fluent Iroquois, and he studied Native American customs and culture extensively. During his stay with the tribe, Weiser lived with the family of Quaynant, a Mohawk chief, and was eventually accepted as an adopted member of Quaynant's wife's family. His immersion into the ways of the Iroquois gave Weiser a profound and unique perspective that made

The grounds of the Conrad Weiser Homestead contain a heroic depiction of the Iroquois Shikellamy by Joseph Pollia

him a valuable asset for the proprietary government in its dealings with Native Americans. In 1720, Weiser married Anna Eve Feck, with whom he eventually had 14 children. In 1729 Weiser and his family left the Mohawk Valley for Pennsylvania. They settled and built their home on the rich farmland of the Tulpehocken Valley in what is now Womelsdorf—midway between Reading and Lebanon— a location to which Germans had been migrating from New York since 1723. Weiser prospered in the Pennsylvania colony, building a tannery, engaging in surveying, and investing in land.

However, during these years Weiser didn't concentrate exclusively on monetary pursuits. He also devoted considerable time to spiritual development, serving as a schoolmaster and lay reader for a German Lutheran congregation. He was appointed justice of the Lancaster County courts and, when Berks County was created in 1752, he became its first president judge. During this time he became one of the region's most widely known settlers, and his reputation for understanding Native American culture grew. Weiser, hand-picked by Provincial Secretary James Logan, played a significant role in developing colonial policy with the Iroquois Confederacy. At the time, Pennsylvania was governed by Quakers, most of whom were strict pacifists who hoped to avoid using military force,



even in their own self-defense. But Weiser and Logan believed that a strong defense was needed as a deterrent to ensure that Pennsylvania's borders would remain peaceful. And troubling signs were coming from the frontier, with increasing clashes between Native Americans and settlers resulting in bloodshed, fear and reprisals.

Trouble was brewing in two regions. In eastern Pennsylvania, the Delaware and Shawnee— despite a legacy of their peaceful relations with William Penn— were growing more angry at being pushed out of their homelands by the increasing number of frontier settlements. The situa-

tion in the Susquehanna Valley was even more volatile, as large bands of Native American refugees from the south— moving slowly northward to join the Iroquois in upstate New York— were establishing temporary colonies as they traveled. Weiser and Logan knew the Iroquois were supporting these settlements in the Iroquois tradition that members of other nations who seek the Confederacy's protection should receive it and be adopted. Various bands of Native Americans— Tuscaroras, Nanticokes, Conoys, and Tutelowes— all sent representatives to the Iroquois capital of Onondaga requesting permission, which they received, to move north through Pennsylvania.

The Iroquois saw this refugee movement as a way of maintaining a Native American presence in the Susquehanna Valley. They also knew that the migrations posed the danger of clashes with neighboring colonial settlers. To balance these two elements and ensure continued friendly relations with the colonists, the Onondaga Council— the highest governing body of the Iroquois Confederacy— dispatched a deputy to Pennsylvania to act with Iroquois authority over the tribes. This official was known among the Delawares as Shikellamy, which is pronounced “Shi-KELL-a-mee,” and means “Our Enlightener.”

Weiser was instrumental in forging Pennsylvania’s new policy which recognized Iroquois authority over the Native Americans within the colony’s borders. The policy was sound in theory, but there was still a question as to whether it could be effectively carried out. A person of unquestioned integrity and stature would be needed to administer such a policy, one who could hold the trust of both colonists and Native Americans. The Iroquois already had appointed Shikellamy, who was respected both by his people and the colonists. Pennsylvania appointed Conrad Weiser, who was known to be on good terms with some of the Mohawks. It was unclear, however, how he would be received by the Iroquois and their famed Onondaga Council.

It was the answer to that question that made Weiser’s first journey to Onondaga so important in 1737. Weiser showed the Iroquois that he had the qualities they most admired: truthfulness, courage, and utter devotion, even to the point of death, to the task at hand. Weiser was commissioned by Pennsylvania to present an invitation from the government of Virginia to the Onondaga Council to send delegates to a peace conference at Williamsburg. It was an urgent matter because Virginia was allied with the Catawbas, who were at war with the Iroquois. The danger loomed that Virginia might be drawn into a

war with the Iroquois, which could potentially pull Pennsylvania into the conflict. Weiser was instructed to rush to Onondaga in time to halt Iroquois war parties scheduled to set out in the spring.

Weiser left home on February 27, 1737, crossing the Blue Mountain by Indian path and joining up with Shikellamy. The traveling party ran into heavy snow, making the trip difficult and treacherous. With war or peace hanging in the balance, they pressed on, climbing cliffs to escape flooded valleys and struggling on foot through snow that was at times up to their knees.

After six terrible weeks, exhausted and starving, Weiser collapsed in the snow. If it had not been for Shikellamy, he would have died on the trail. When they arrived April 10 in Onondaga, Weiser mustered enough strength to stand before the assembly of chiefs and deliver his message, confirming it with a belt of white wampum, the symbol of peace. The chiefs immediately dispatched runners to all parts of the Six Nations to call off preparations for war. Weiser emerged from this episode an Iroquois hero. When he returned to Onondaga in 1743 to make



Conrad Weiser's seal



The Conrad Weiser Homestead in Womelsdorf, Berks County, Pennsylvania.

amends for the slaying of Iroquois travelers by settlers in Virginia, he was hailed as Tarachiawagon, "the Holder of the Heavens," which was a title reserved for the Master of Life, or the Great Spirit.

Weiser was one of Pennsylvania's most noted travelers, whether on horseback, on foot, or by canoe. He made five journeys to the Iroquois homeland: in 1737, 1743, 1745, 1750, and 1751. The most significant trip he undertook after 1737 was in 1748, when he traveled to Logstown, eighteen miles below the Point at Pittsburgh on the Ohio River. Weiser's stated goal was to "brighten the chain of friendship" with Native Americans in the region, and specifically to claim the Ohio-

Allegheny country for the English colonies, which prompted French counterclaims on the region. This resulted in the French and Indian War, which established English colonial control of the land.

Weiser was widely known as a man of peace, but he was willing to take up arms when necessary. The Delawares and the Shawnees turned to violence after the Native American forces defeated General Braddock and began to murder settlers in the Susquehanna Valley. When Weiser heard that they had crossed the Susquehanna River and were poised to attack settlements in his beloved Tulpehocken Valley, he raised a force of men and immediately marched toward the Blue Mountain



This money belt reputedly belonged to Conrad Weiser.

barrier. Weiser spent weeks organizing town defenses and posting volunteers at strategic points along the Blue Mountain. Weiser was commissioned a Lieutenant Colonel in the Pennsylvania Regiment's First Battalion, which spent nearly two years holding a line of forts extending from the Susquehanna to the Delaware River. This prevented the French and their allies from penetrating deeply into the province.

During this turmoil, most of the Iroquois maintained their friendship and peace with Pennsylvania. Their refugee colonies remained quiet and were a restraining influence on the Delawares. At the Easton peace conference of 1758, at which Weiser was an interpreter, the Iroquois pressured the Delawares into ceasing hostilities. A few weeks later at the Forks of the Ohio, the French—threatened by the advance of a British army and deprived of their Native American allies—blew up Fort Duquesne and departed.

Weiser was Berks County's most distinguished citizen during the colonial era. Although he lived most of his life in the arena of worldly affairs, he had a deeply religious side. In 1734, Weiser began a spiritual journey with Conrad Beissel, a mystic with the German Seventh Day Baptist Church who had recently established the Ephrata Cloister, a

monastic settlement in the nearby Cocalico Valley. Weiser was among a group of Tulpehocken Valley settlers who, in 1735, accepted baptism from Beissel. Following the ritual, Weiser burned his Lutheran devotionals and attempted to establish a congregation in the Tulpehocken Valley. He met with opposition to this attempt and moved from his home, with his wife, to the Ephrata Cloister, where he was known as Brother Enoch. Anna stayed only a few months before moving back. Conrad Weiser stayed for six years, although he made frequent visits to his family, resulting in the birth of four of his children. Weiser left the Ephrata Cloister in 1741 and resumed his life in the Tulpehocken Valley. After returning from Ephrata, Weiser became the foremost layman of his day in the Lutheran Church in America. He also was a great promoter of the Native American mission which the Moravian Church established in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

Weiser died on July 13, 1760 at his home in the Tulpehocken Valley, but his descendants went on to play important roles in the history of Pennsylvania and the United States. His daughter Maria married Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, the patriarch of the Lutheran Church in America.

Two of his grandsons were among the founders of the United States: Major General John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg, a hero of Brandywine, Germantown, and Yorktown; and Frederick Augustus Conrad Muhlenberg, Speaker of the House of Representatives in the First and Third Congresses.

The Conrad Weiser Homestead in Womelsdorf, Berks County, is now a state historical site operated by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Visitors can enjoy the remarkable

grounds, designed by landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and John Charles Olmsted, which include a pond, groves, paths for walking and hiking, and buildings that provide a feel for the culture and historical period. Weiser, his wife, and several of their children are interred in a family burial plot on the homestead grounds.

Original text by Paul A. W. Wallace; edited by Rod Snyder

For Further Reading

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